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Reframing the Achievement Gap: Ensuring All Students Benefit from Equitable Access to Learning



"[Educational] disparities are a result of historical, economic, political, and moral decisions that we as a society have made over time."

-Gloria Ladson-Billings



Did You Know

Focusing on the Achievement Gap Can Prevent Reflecting on How We Can Improve Our Educational Systems

Much of the current rhetoric surrounding the so-called achievement gap compares standardized test scores of students who belong to racially, ethnically, and economically marginalized groups to students who are largely White and middle class. (Chen, et al., 2013; Coomer, Kyser, Thorius, & Skelton, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006). This comparison neglects how public education is a historically situated socio-cultural and sociopolitical enterprise. The notion of an achievement gap emphasizes that a student's educational success is largely due to intrinsic motivations or characteristics attributable to a family's perceived culture (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Louie, 2008), while ignoring the generational malpractices students of color, students from disinvested communities, and students with dis/abilities (Annamma, Conner, & Ferri, 2013) have experienced year after year (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Often missing from rhetoric about the achievement gap is that not all students have access to the same quality transportation, nutrition, in-school and after-school enrichment, school facilities, and educators (Chambers, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Research informs us that outcomes of educational policies have shorted historically marginalized students (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Whiteman, Thorius, Skelton, & Kyser, 2015), and as these inequities persist, so do the disparities in student performance. Therefore, we must move away from solely burdening outcome-based performance on students and families, and focus on creating equitable opportunities to learn (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Louie, 2008).

Conceptualizing the achievement gap in this way not only affects how educators think about their students, but also how they perceive their own ability (Diamond, 2008). How educators think and talk about students in built-in, institutionalized, in-school venues (e.g. PLCs, data teams, school improvement teams) for discussing student performance (Young, 2016) symbolically changes them from dynamic learners to static, passive receivers of information (Young, 2016). Effectually, this pathologizes (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Millner, 2012) students and families in such a way that the "gap" continues to widen (Ladson-Billings, 2007; Chambers, 2009).



Why It Matters

Shifting Focus to School Practices, Policies, and Structures Supports the Advancement of Equitable Opportunities for ALL Students

Continuing to think of educational disparities in terms of an individual student's failure to achieve, or collective stereotyping of the ways certain groups of people value schooling, keeps discourse and policy focused on temporary band-aides aimed at increasing test scores. It is necessary to (re)frame educational inequities in ways that place them in socio-historical and sociopolitical contexts that have institutionalized educational inequalities in areas such as funding, health, and wealth (Kyser, Whiteman, Bangert, Skelton, & Thorius, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Mckernan et al, 2015; Weir, 2013). Rather than deficit-oriented examinations of student merit, performance, and family values, an examination of educational inequalities allows for conversations about how school practices, structures, policies and resources can be transformed to ensure equitable and consistent access to and representation and participation in robust, rigorous, and effective educational opportunities.

Examining access to resources can be a good starting place in reframing conversations around student performance. While many resources are legislated, allocated, or otherwise controlled by bureaucratic systems outside the school's walls, there is one resource where change can begin to happen almost immediately: with the educator. Without oversimplifying what it means to be a [critically conscious educator](#), it is possible, if not necessary, for educators to look at the ways they think and talk about students. It is important for educators to understand how the language they use is both reflective of the ways they think about students and families, as well as how it can influence their beliefs about themselves as effective educators (Young, 2016; Diamond, 2008).

Critical examination by those who are doing the educating enables educators to reflect on the educational system in its broader context that often includes deficit orientations toward students and families. Thus, consider how these deficit mindsets affect students' access to educational opportunities year over year (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This level of critical reflection by educators can lead to solutions that are not rooted in policy and practice focused on individual performance, but in [collaboration with parent/caregivers and community partners](#). This collaboration can lead to the generation of solutions that focus on creating inclusive, responsive and effective learning environments for all students.



For Equity Now

Changing the Way We Think and Talk About Students Can Bolster Our Ability to Teach ALL Students

By examining and changing the ways in which school practitioners talk about students and think about their own efficacy, we can redress missed opportunities for students in a number of ways:

The Way We Think

Diamond (2008) suggests several ways to avoid falling into the habit of blaming students and families for educational outcomes:

- Avoid the "language of blame" (p. 255).
- Do not let student challenges detract from the impact of school.
- Engaging a student's family can help educators "make meaningful connections" with parents/caregivers and families, and respect that "parent[/caregiver] involvement may take different forms" (p. 256). With this in mind, the question educators can ask themselves and each other can shift from "what isn't the family doing?" to "what am I doing?" and "what can the school do to support family involvement?" (p. 256)

The Way We Talk

- Examine the "teacher talk" (Young, 2016, p.67) between you and your colleagues regarding student performance. Ensure the way you talk changes students, "symbolically as well as politically and socially..." (p. 68).
- Examine your own beliefs about students, your own attitudes, and the ways in which you talk about students in formal and informal conversations with other educators. This is critical because the ways in which educators talk about students affects their perception and thinking (Young, 2016). This, in turn affects how they talk about students, as well as how they perceive their own efficacy (Young, 2016; Diamond, 2008).
- Develop a **critical consciousness** that affords you the opportunity to surface times when you and your colleagues may be problematizing a students' home environment (Young, 2016) and focus on your own behavior and responsibility.

Meet the Authors

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Recommended citation: Coomer, M. N., Jackson, R. G., Kyser, T. S., Skelton, S. M., & Thorius, K. A. K. (2017). Reframing the achievement gap: Ensuring all students benefit from equitable access to learning. *Equity Dispatch*. Indianapolis, IN: Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

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